



Obiols, Edda and Brown, Tony (2020) Confronting the elitist stranglehold of everyday reality. British Educational Research Association.

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Version: Accepted Version

Publisher: British Educational Research Association

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

Confronting the elitist stranglehold of everyday reality

Edda Sant and Tony Brown

Our recent paper in the *British Educational Research Journal* (Sant & Brown, 2020) seeks to question the logic by which education, education and yet more education will bring about emancipation from the hidden exercise of force that underpins populist movements in contemporary politics. We showed how the fantasy of the educational cure operates as an ideology protecting education's project of securing customers for its product in the market place. For example, in England the university sector's more critical ambitions have been displaced by demand-side financial clout in dollops of £9,250 fuelled by desires schooled in suppositions of the future job market, and more immediate demands in university classroom dynamics secured through the National Student Survey (Thiel, 2019).

These marketised demands are inculcated in students long before they reach university. The recent furore over A' level results in that country and the operation, or not, of an algorithm in producing the correct distribution of grades across schools, has deflected attention from the chief assessment function of such exams. That is, as a selection device that dutifully, year after year, produces the right number and distribution of students for pre-defined course quotas across the university sector. As for the young woman pictured in the Guardian with a banner declaring "I'm a student, not a statistic"? Get real – the heat is on to stage-manage your own statistical profile if you want to be liked. Universities are part of the state's ideological apparatus designed to produce a compatible citizenship.

The economist Thomas Piketty (2020) argues that populism has emerged as a consequence of left wing parties now speaking more to the educated winners of globalisation who have a self-serving image of how efforts should be rewarded, and how populism has emerged as an alternative for the disenfranchised looking for different scapegoats. He sees the reduced influence of workers' parties as being a consequence of the disillusionment with the collapse of real life communism, and capitalism glorifying in its own success through an enhanced assertion of the free market. There is a real difficulty in putting together a coherent programme for the less advantaged as the collectivised union model that initiated the Labour movement has less traction in current circumstances where the disadvantaged are highly dispersed across many sectors and countries with little coordinated support.

Our paper transcends such economised perspectives with winners and losers. We adopt a critique of ideology where the populist fantasy, centred on there being an elitist stranglehold of everyday reality, is a victim of its own deception. The populist fantasy fails to recognise the impossibility of escaping the ideological constraints within or outside institutionalised forms of education. Emancipatory education can only aim at transparent rationality but will 'imprison' us in old or new power relations. Emancipatory education necessarily ties knowledge and authority altogether. But this leaves us with the question of what we would want emancipation to bring about. How might we conceptualise future progressive paths in education? What would we want them to achieve? Edda (Sant, 2019) has reviewed a broad range of conceptualisations from the point of view of how education is variously aligned with democratic ambitions. She identifies the existence of at least eight distinctive emancipatory

projects within the academic literature. Each project sustains its understanding of emancipatory education in distinctive ontological, epistemological and ethical grounds.

Our BERJ paper, however, follows the political theorist Ernesto Laclau in arguing that human beings need to recognise themselves as the true creators and no longer be passive recipients of a predetermined structure. On the other hand, all social agents have to recognise their concrete finitude as nobody can aspire to be the true consciousness of the world. Might then we emancipate ourselves from both populist and anti-populist discourses? And if so, how should we do this? Or does the discursive landscape require renewal so that educational trajectories can be thought differently? It seems that we need a new fantasy and must question how we might understand education within this. We will surely fail again but may learn to fail better or, more likely, differently.

Piketty, T. (2020) *Capital and Ideology*. London: Belknap.

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